

# Engaging farmers in sustainability: Barriers and assessments



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# Introduction

This report shares key findings from research with farm advisors in Wales, focusing on the barriers to engaging farmers in sustainability and how these might be overcome. It also examines how on-farm sustainability assessments could help address these barriers and support positive change.

Farm advisors play a central role in improving sustainability within the farming sector. They use a range of methods to share knowledge, support learning and drive change on-farm. Many have built trusted, long-standing relationships with the farmers they work with, making them a vital part of bottom-up change towards more sustainable and regenerative farming systems. Therefore, understanding the barriers they face when engaging with farmers, and developing approaches to support and enhance their work, are vital to improving agricultural sustainability.

This report presents key insights from research carried out with farm advisors in Wales to investigate barriers to farmer engagement on sustainability topics and their potential solutions. The report also explores the use of on-farm sustainability assessments as a tool to address these barriers and to drive change.

Learnings highlight the value of using a conceptual framework to build farmer understanding of sustainability prior to carrying out formal assessments, and the need for such assessments to form part of a well-supported, relevant and practical process of change.


The research described was carried out within the Space for Local Food Production project — a Monmouthshire County Council project funded through the UK Government Community Renewal Fund and involving the Sustainable Food Trust, Farming Connect, the Wye and Usk Foundation and Natural Resources Wales.

It has provided key learnings that have informed the development of the Global Farm Metric framework. The original full project report is available to read online (Kipling and Wheeler, 2022).

## ACTIVITIES AND APPROACH

A survey of 88 farm advisors in Wales was used to investigate their views on sustainability and the barriers they faced when engaging with farmers. The survey was facilitated by Farming Connect and 42 responses were returned. A workshop with 10 advisors was then used to explore solutions to the barriers identified in the survey, focusing on the role of on-farm sustainability assessments.

Additional insights were gathered via feedback forms and interviews with farmers across a number of farm trials (including within the Space for Local Production Project and Global Farm Metric project), which tested the usefulness of a farm-level sustainability assessment tool (Global Farm Metric, 2022; 2025).



**Understanding the barriers farm advisors face when engaging with farmers, and developing approaches to support and enhance their work, are vital to improving agricultural sustainability.**



# Findings

## Communicating environmental and social sustainability

Advisors saw social and environmental sustainability as important but can find them challenging to discuss with farmers due to their complexity and existing pressures on farm businesses.

Understanding the perceived importance of social and environmental sustainability, and the challenges advisors face engaging with farmers on this, is key to supporting meaningful change on the ground.

The majority of advisors surveyed considered both social and environmental sustainability to be either 'important' or 'essential' to good farming practice. However, they reported that these aspects are central to farming practices on only 'some' or 'a few' of the farms they work with.

Advisors were generally more likely to provide advice or information on environmental sustainability than on social sustainability and they found it easier to talk to farmers on environmental topics. Survey responses showed that, once advisors engaged with farmers on either social or environmental sustainability, they could discuss a broad range of issues.

Many felt that environmental sustainability was already a complex and, at times, challenging concept to communicate to farmers. Introducing social dimensions — such as worker well-being or public access to farms — risked further complicating these conversations or could be perceived by farmers as expanding expectations at a time when many already felt under pressure.

Overall, while advisors recognise the importance of both social and environmental sustainability, their ability to support farmers in these areas, particularly social sustainability, is limited by the perceived complexity of these issues and the existing pressures farmers face.

**“Understanding the perceived importance of social and environmental sustainability, and the challenges advisors face engaging with farmers on this, is key to supporting meaningful change on the ground”**



## Approaching advice on sustainability

Advisors were split on whether sustainability requires a different engagement approach than economic topics: some found it challenging to discuss, while others succeed by employing holistic, discursive methods.

Previous research has suggested that providing farmers with advice on social and environmental sustainability may present new challenges for farm advisors, requiring a different approach than that taken when providing advice on productivity and economic sustainability (Kipling and Becoña, 2019).

Around half of the advisors surveyed aligned with this view, perceiving sustainability as a distinct engagement challenge. These advisors felt that farmers were mainly focused on profit and less interested in sustainability, and that they would not be comfortable discussing it. Their comments suggested that framing sustainability in economic terms could improve engagement.

In contrast, almost half of the advisors surveyed did not see sustainability presenting a distinct engagement challenge. Their responses indicated that a holistic and discursive approach was already part of their advisory practice, helping to facilitate conversations and engagement with farmers on sustainability. This may have shaped their perception that farmers are generally positive and focused on sustainability issues.

The survey findings suggest that some advisors adopt a more specialised approach to advice than others, tailored to the specific requirements of engaging on economics and productivity. A specialised approach may be less adaptable and therefore more difficult to use when engaging farmers on sustainability issues. For these topics, a more holistic and discursive approach to farm advice may facilitate better engagement. However, differences in views on engagement challenges may reflect the types of farmers advisors work with as much as their own approach.

## Challenges to engaging farmers on sustainability

Meaningful change requires tackling the costs and complexities of engagement itself, as many barriers to engaging farmers on sustainability mirrored those to implementing sustainable practices.

Fourteen types of challenges to engaging with farmers on sustainability were identified from survey responses. These can be grouped into five categories:

1. Practical: resource constraints, such as time, money, infrastructure
2. Knowledge: lack of information for farmers, e.g. about sustainable practices and their risks and potential benefits
3. Cognitive: limited time to reflect and take in information amid complex, high-pressure farming
4. Mindset: shaped by trust, motivations, fears and external agendas
5. Communication: Shaped by advisor expertise and wider external messaging influences

The first four categories align with categories identified in previous work, looking at barriers to implementing climate-friendly farming practices (Kipling et al, 2019; Fig 1). 'Communication' emerged from the survey as an additional theme, relating both to advisors themselves — their knowledge, experience and perspectives — and to the broader context of engagement, shaped by messaging from policymakers, the media and other external actors.

The overlap between the themes identified in survey responses and previous research suggests that the same types of challenges affect engaging with farmers on sustainability as affect implementing changes towards more sustainable farming. This highlights that engagement itself carries costs and encounters barriers which must be addressed before lasting change can be achieved.



**Fig. 1: The barriers to engagement and change identified in this research and previous studies (with the addition of communication).**

# What role can assessment play?

Farm advisors saw sustainability assessments as potentially helpful for addressing knowledge and complexity challenges, but warned they could backfire if poorly designed or badly timed, especially given financial and trust-related barriers.

During the workshop, farmers were presented with the 14 barriers to engagement (fig. 1) and asked whether they thought a sustainability assessment would help solve these challenges. Of the 14 challenges identified, 'cost of change' and 'short-term financial pressure' were amalgamated, as were 'farmer knowledge' and 'farmer understanding, when advisors were asked to give their views. 'Poor community-farmer relations' was not included as it was identified as an issue only after this exercise.

The barriers they believed would be most likely to be positively affected by a sustainability assessment were: the knowledge and understanding of sustainability among farmers; the knowledge and understanding of farm advisors; and the complexity of sustainability. On the other hand, barriers relating to costs, financial pressures or fear of external interference were viewed as least likely to be positively affected by an assessment.

Advisors felt that most barriers to engagement would only partially be addressed by an assessment — these were barriers associated with communication, trust, lack of agency, lack of clear benefits and difficulty of change. There were also mixed views on the impacts of an assessment on farmer mindset.

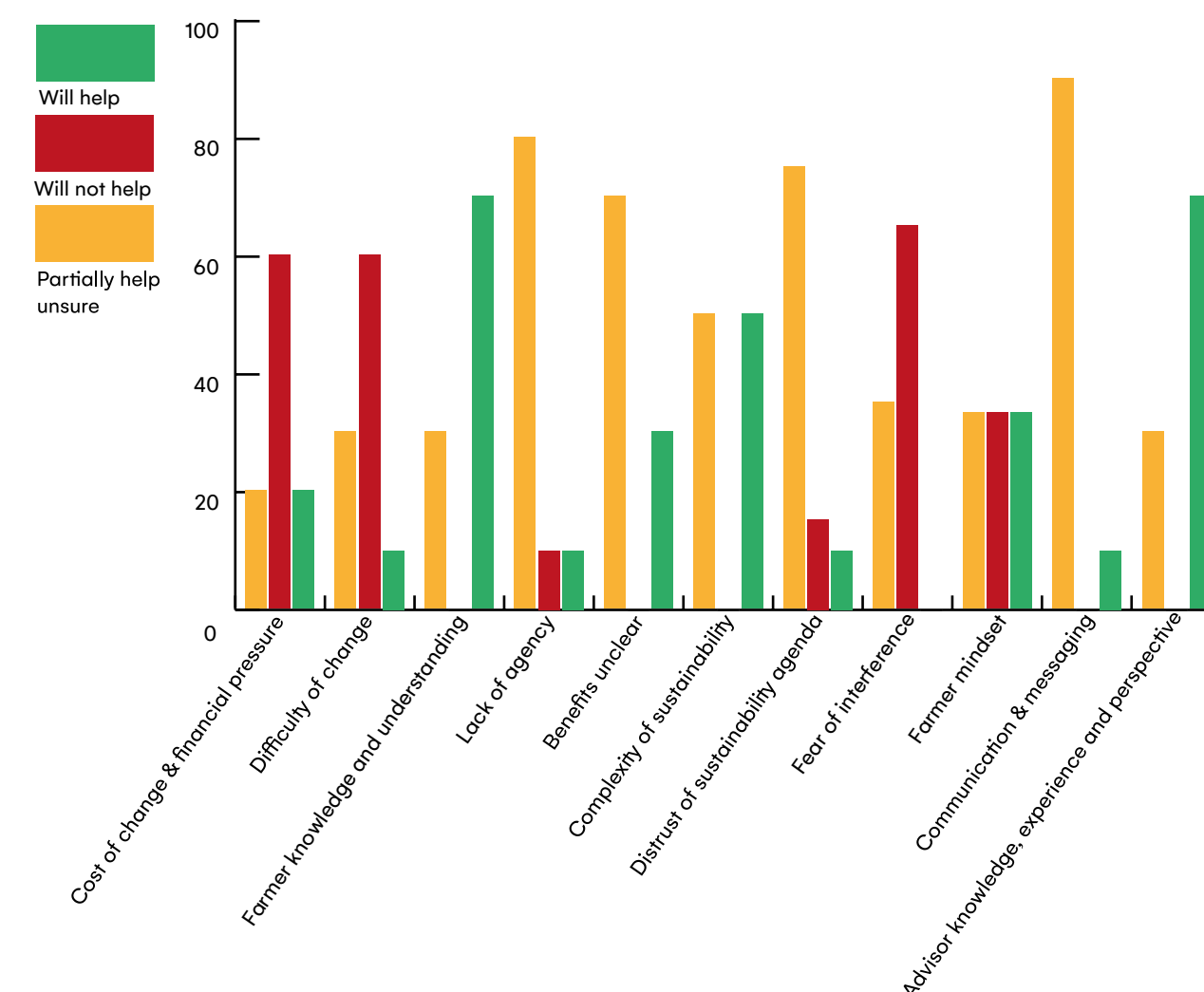
Overall, it was felt that while a well-designed assessment applied at the right time in a farmer's sustainability journey might solve some of these challenges, there was concern an assessment with weaknesses applied at the wrong time could have a negative impact on these barriers to engagement and change. See Fig 2 (opposite).

# The importance of assessment design

Advisors emphasised that the design, presentation and implementation of sustainability assessments are crucial to their effectiveness in overcoming engagement challenges. To drive positive change, assessments must be clear, practical, and seen as legitimate by both advisors and farmers.

Advisors' views on the likely usefulness of farm assessments in addressing challenges to engagement and change, highlighted that how assessments are designed, presented and implemented is vital in determining their effect on the majority of challenges.

To be successful in driving positive change, farm advisors felt that a formal sustainability assessment, must be effective (clear, relevant and provide pathways to change), practical (usable and addressing issues of feasibility, applicability and scope), and legitimate (transparent and robust).



**Fig. 2: Farm advisor views on whether a sustainability assessment would help them to tackle challenges to engagement with farmers on sustainability**



**Fig 3: Solutions to knowledge and cognitive barriers to engagement**

## How else can we address barriers to engagement and change?

Advisors suggested that beyond assessments, improving engagement with sustainability requires clear, relevant, and actionable support – through regulation, training, communication, and peer learning – while noting that poorly designed assessments could risk reinforcing other barriers.

In the workshop, advisors were asked to suggest additional ways — beyond assessment — to increase engagement with sustainability and address barriers to change. As advisors felt that knowledge and cognition-related barriers were the challenges which assessments are best placed to address, solutions to these barriers were a focal point.

The solutions related to the context of engagement (supportive regulation and incentives, education and advisor training, as well as effective communication about sustainability), initial engagement (clarifying sustainability and highlighting the value of action for the farmer and for society) and creating a pathway to change (relevant and actionable information and learning from others).

These solutions focus less on specific methods of knowledge exchange (e.g. articles, videos, advice), and more on the clarity, relevance and actionability of the content. Farmer-to-farmer engagement was highlighted as a particularly effective approach to overcoming barriers to engagement and change. The findings described highlight a tension: while sustainability assessments can help overcome knowledge and cognition-related barriers, they may also create or worsen other barriers if they are not seen as effective, credible, or practical.



# A vital role for a conceptual sustainability framework

Farm trials showed that while sustainability assessments can prompt valuable insights and action, challenges such as time demands, digital barriers, and assessment fatigue highlight the need for support, data harmonisation, and first introducing a clear, holistic framework to build understanding before formal assessment.

Farm trials of the GFM research tool in 2022–2023 (including within the Space for Local Production project and beyond), demonstrate that the process of undertaking an assessment (not just its results) can provide farmers with insights into farm sustainability, stimulate new ideas and thinking around opportunities for change, and lead to farmers reporting that they are more likely to implement such ideas (Global Farm Metric, 2022; 2025).

However, the time taken for farmers to carry out such self-assessments, including data collection and input, can be a major challenge, especially for farms with fewer resources and more complex mixed systems, and farmers who are not confident with information technology or who have additional needs.

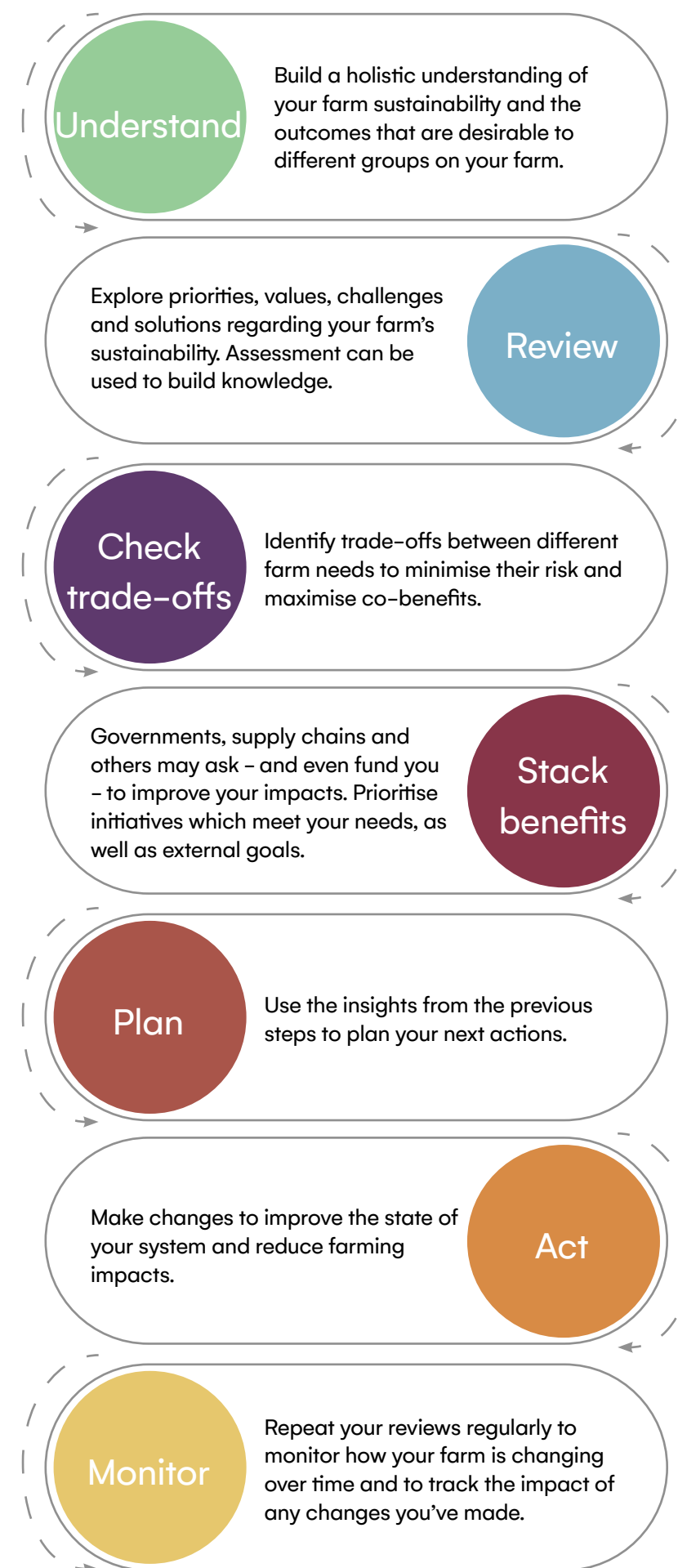
It was also highlighted that farmers are generally not receptive to additional or repeated annual assessments. Instead, repeating assessments at longer intervals (e.g. every 2–5 years) was suggested, particularly for outcomes that change gradually over time. To reduce duplication and burden, harmonising assessments and enabling data sharing was recommended, so that farmers do not have to enter the same information multiple times. The importance of providing support, such as through farm advisors, was also emphasised.

Critically, it was also recommended to first use a clear, holistic sustainability framework to help farmers build understanding of what sustainability means, why it matters and how it relates to their farm. Used in this way, a holistic concept of

sustainability, presented separately from an assessment, can be a low-cost way to reduce barriers to sustainability engagement. Based on the knowledge, understanding, and ideas that could be generated by farmers discussing such a framework with advisors and peers, farmers would be much better placed to later undertake a formal assessment.

They would also have more of the wider knowledge and understanding required to make best use of assessment findings, enabling them to more effectively drive change that benefited their business, the environment and the wider community. This can be visualised as a pathway to change (see fig 4), while recognising that every farm's sustainability journey and starting point will be different.

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**Fig 4. Assessment as part of process of change**

## How have we built on this work?

Achieving meaningful large-scale change will require more than assessments and action by individual farms.

The action required to address global warming, biodiversity destruction and global food supply challenges will require extensive processes of change — including ongoing support, systemic reform and collaboration across the food and farming landscape.

The GFM team is committed to making collective, inclusive and empowering processes of change a reality. As part of this, we continue to develop a conceptual framework for farm-level sustainability and connect actors across the supply chain (fig 5).

To find out more and get involved, visit [globalfarmmetric.org](https://globalfarmmetric.org), follow us on socials (@GFMcoalition) or contact [info@globalfarmmetric.org](mailto:info@globalfarmmetric.org).



Fig 5: The Global Farm Metric wheel (2025)

## Key insights

Research with advisors and farmers, including a survey, workshop and farm trials with the GFM research tool, revealed key learnings about the barriers to engagement and change.

- Many previously identified barriers to implementing more sustainable farming — practical, knowledge-based, cognitive and interest-related — are also barriers to effective engagement with farmers.
- A holistic, systems-based advisory approach is best suited to engaging farmers on sustainability, adapting methods to each farm's unique context and farmer perspective.
- A clear, conceptual sustainability framework can reduce engagement barriers, especially when it highlights the value of change for both the farm and wider society.
- For many farmers, use of a holistic framework to inform discussions, along with learning, are essential before formal assessments are introduced. Without this foundation, assessments risk increasing barriers to future engagement.
- Farm trials show that assessments can spark valuable insight and drive action, but risk discouraging engagement if they are not well-supported, spaced over time, aligned with other data systems and supported by advisors.
- The time it takes to carry out assessments can be a major challenge, especially for farms with fewer resources and more complex mixed systems, as well as those less confident with information technology or with learning difficulties.
- Assessments should be embedded in positive, supported processes of change. This starts with relationship-building and use of a conceptual framework and includes practical follow-up through peer learning and collective processes that empower farmers and build momentum for change.
- Crucially, sustainability assessments shouldn't only prompt change on-farm. They must also be used pro-actively to identify and address off-farm drivers of unsustainable practices, from fossil fuel dependency and sprawling developments to market pressures and declining rural services.



## References

See the original report for a full list of references at:  
[globalfarmmetric.org/reports](https://globalfarmmetric.org/reports)

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**“Change requires  
all actors to collaborate  
and create the enabling  
conditions for farmers  
to be part of the solution  
to current climate, nature  
and health crises”**



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